

“ONE HELL OF A
LOUDSPEAKER ...

... outstanding performance in every conceivable parameter ...”

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*“... a first rate affair ...
they do so much so right ...
wonderful sound ... open
... pure ... unassuming ...
maintains the best of what
Paradigm has done in the
past, while pushing the
performance envelope to a
much higher level.”*

by Chris Montreuil

You ever get the feeling you are in the wrong business? I know I do. At the top of my list for alternative career paths is seer. The first shred of evidence that led me down the prognostication path was at CES during a memorable dinner with the friendly folks at Paradigm. With the libations and anecdotes spiraling out of control, I took the opportunity to pick the brain of a company that has established itself as one of the leaders in price to performance loudspeaker design.

You see, I have always admired their product, more specifically the level of engineering and research they pack into those boxes, but I had always wondered what they could accomplish if they were to set price constraints to the side and focus their efforts purely on performance.

With that in mind, I asked some of the more senior people in the company if they had ever entertained such a notion. They assured me that their focus remained on value and not the cost no object

decadence of some the audio world's more luxurious designers. While I thought there was a market for a high end line from Paradigm, I understood their desire to focus on what has kept them the success that they are.

Well, just two years after my inquiry, low and behold, Paradigm unveils the Signature Series. This is a line that represents a departure from their previous efforts in its focus on performance, with price taking a notable back seat. Before I start claiming the rights to Nostradamus' throne, I suspect Paradigm had been well under way with the Signature project at the time of my posit, though it does at least make for an interesting coincidence. So when the offer came to review these beauties, it seemed only appropriate that I accept.

S8



"I was immediately impressed with the speakers' open presentation ... a tonal balance which allowed the majority of my collection to sound its best ... vocals are presented in such a pure unassuming way so as to completely suck you into the song ... dead center, with the reverberant decay — echoing back into the soundstage."

The Signature Series is Paradigm's first foray into the "higher" end world of speaker design. While at first blush you might think entering this realm is risky territory for Paradigm, but they hedged their bets well with their substantial R&D. For those of you who may not know, Paradigm has access to some of the most sophisticated testing facilities available to any manufacturer. While that may not guarantee outstanding performance, it certainly gives them a leg up on the competition and instills a confidence that your speaker is one of the most thoroughly designed at any price point.

RUNDOWN

The 5.1 Signature system I evaluated consisted of Paradigm's flagship S8, used for the front L/R channels (reviewed as a stereo pair by Yongki Go of *Secrets*, see the Review section of the Paradigm website at www.paradigm.com), the C5 Center Channel, a pair of ADP Surrounds, and rounding out the collection, the Signature Servo Subwoofer.

What is important to know about the drivers is that they are made in house to Paradigm's exacting specifications. Paradigm is one of the few companies in the industry who can make such a claim. I do not want to imply that outsourcing drivers from reputable OEMs is not a

legitimate method of speaker design, but I do think it says something about a company who has both the expertise and resources to handle all aspects of their production. It is the safest way to maintain quality control.

The high level philosophy that pervades the Signature line does not end at the speakers themselves. Their packaging is of the appropriate overkill variety that, in this case, is especially important considering just how heavy these things are. Try rolling an unwieldy 110+lb. box up a flight of stairs and you will see my point. Even the diminutive ADPs carry some weight to them. When installing these speakers be sure to enlist the help of friends, or even better yet, get your dealer to do the grunt work. At this price they should do so happily.

"The continuous barrage of sounds from didgeridoo to flute — all occurring in very specific, different spots in the soundstage can really tax a speaker's resolve ... The S8 absolutely sailed through ... creating a wall of sound as wide as it was deep, with every instrument clearly rendered and operating within its own specific space."

If there was an area where the ancillary aspects of the speakers left me unsatisfied, it would be in their documentation. The instructions provided with each speaker could prove confusing to some in that they were not specific to the model they accompanied and were a bit vague in areas I thought should have more detail. I know Mensa will not be blazing a path to my door anytime soon, but I do think the accompanying documentation should have been specific to the speaker. Nothing to jump up and down over but certainly worth noting.

"... excellent dialogue reproduction, frequency response and dynamic handling ... clear treble with excellent tonal balance ... truly lovely ... the C5 is one of the best center speakers I have heard ..."

THE LOOK OF LOVE

Once you start creeping into this price range for a 5.1 system, customers rightfully expect craftsmanship of a very high order. Let us dispense with this quickly: these speakers look like a million bucks. My review samples came in a cherry veneer that prompted one visitor to the theater to exclaim, "Man these make your other speakers look like *%#@."

Hyperbole? Yes. Uncouth? A little. But when you consider that my reference speakers are finished in a lustrous Rose Walnut veneer, that says a lot about the leap the Signature Series makes in terms of finish. Believe me when I say these things will look prettier a lot longer than any of us. There is an ironic comfort in that.

The Paradigm's exemplary finish does have a lot of reflectivity. In the position they occupied in my theater, the S8s and C5 were very close to my screen. With the projector in action, the amount of light reflected by the screen was sufficient to reflect off the speaker which, in addition to being obtrusive, caused picture quality to suffer. Food for thought when you are in the planning stages of speaker placement relative to the display area. If I were to install these long term, I would seriously consider draping the side panel in blackout velvet.

The other side of the duo, the fit that is, is also superb throughout the line. One look and subsequent touch at the hefty metal back plate of the Signature Servo says it all. This stuff is made to last with a level of craftsmanship that exceeds all of Paradigm's previous efforts. All seams and joints are finely crafted. Even the



C5

speaker grilles are a step up, with a weight that conveyed quality construction. Thought even went into the region of the grille that overlays the tweeter which leaves it completely without obstruction from the grille's hard plastic skeleton, save for the cloth itself. As impressive as the grilles are, the speaker sure looks good in the buff. When you have an array of drivers like that staring you down, it can cause one to lose focus.

SET-UP

My regular evaluation system is of the 7.1 variety, so with this review I had to forgo my side speakers and settle for a rear-only setup with the ADPs 2' from the back wall, 3'3" from the sides, 7.5' apart, 3' above, and 6' from the listening position. I placed the S8s in the same general location of my usual mains (4'3" from the back wall, 3'4" from the side wall, 8' apart from their vertical center axis and 11' from the listening position), as that yielded the best combination of bass extension, response, and soundstage depth/width. I normally run identical speakers across my LCR channels, with the center speaker placed behind an acoustically transparent screen, but in this instance the C5 center channel was of the traditional horizontal variety, and the accompanying stand was not tall enough to place the drivers above the bottom of the screen.

This forced a slight readjustment with center channel positioned directly in front of the screen, equally spaced between the mains, with the tweeter tilted slightly up toward the listening position. The servo sub took residence in the front left corner of the room since that area has the least offensive bass peaks. This is where the servo's bass contour can aid in reducing a room induced peak to even out the response. I happen to prefer my reference subwoofer's digital eq/microphone com-



Signature ADP

bination for its ease of use and fine level adjusting of multiple ranges, but the Paradigm's contour worked well in my tame room.

“Using the Signature ADPs — showed once again how an engaging and cavernous space can be created with a single pair of dipoles ... appropriate diffusive quality ... immense soundfield ... deftly handled large scale explosions and effects ... able to play loud without sounding strained and put up an immense soundstage ... excellent rear fill ... created that cohesive sonic bubble that good 5.1 systems are capable of ... I was left impressed and fully satisfied ...”

Speaker connections with the Signature line are made via WBT posts, which I found a welcome departure to the chunky 5-way binding posts that adorn my other speakers. I was able to achieve a much firmer, more reliable connection with the WBT posts. Unfortunately, the deep wells they are recessed in make it difficult for the svelte/nimble impaired of the world to install (e.g., me). All of the speakers are bi-wireable and were wired as such save for the sub to which I ran a straight mono XLR line out from my Anthem SSP.

I played with multiple bass configurations on the Anthem AVM 20 pre/pro with the crossover to the sub varying from 80 Hz – 40 Hz to none. For two-channel listening, I typically ran the S8s full-range, since their bottom end performance was so exceptional as to make the servo irrelevant. Powering the system was the venerable Theta Dreadnaught for the S8s and C5, and the capable Parasound Halo A51 powering the ADPs. After setting the levels

and time-aligning the speakers, I was anxious to hear what Paradigm's best had to offer.

PERFORMANCE

Having heard some of Paradigm's previous efforts at various trade shows and dealer showrooms, it was difficult for me to divorce myself from looking out for what I consider to be the hallmarks of the Paradigm “sound”. This sound, to these ears anyway, consisted of an even frequency response with excellent bass extension and a treble that tended to err on the brighter side of the spectrum. It is easy to allow hyperbole to rule in a review, so I will try my best to temper my feelings, but on first listen it was quite obvious that the Signature line maintains the best of what Paradigm has done in the past, while pushing the performance envelope to a much higher level.

“... bottom end performance was so exceptional ... Excellent bass extension has always been a hallmark of Paradigm speakers ... the S8 was no exception ... clean output into the low 30s ... stands well on its own when run full range ... excellent extension and pitch.”

Since I am a music lover at heart, I had to begin my evaluation running the S8s full-range with my favorite two-channel music cuts. I was immediately impressed with the speakers' open presentation that struck a tonal balance which allowed the majority of my collection to sound its best. *Dead Can Dance* is a group I was fortunate enough to be introduced to at CES by the folks at Halcro, makers of uber expensive stereo amps and preamps. Hearing “The Ubiquitous Mr. Lovegrove” off the album *Into the Labyrinth* was quite an experience played through a combo of Halcro amplification and Wilson Audio Maxx speakers. Since then it has served as a reference, particularly the aforementioned Lovegrove track, as well as the Lisa Gerard solo piece “The Wind

That Shakes The Barley". On this track Gerard's delicate vocals are presented in such a pure unassuming way so as to completely suck you into the song, even if you do not necessarily know what the heck is coming from that magical voice. Recorded in a cathedral Gerard's vocals were dead center, with the reverberant decay of her voice echoing back into the soundstage.

"... the quality that consistently impressed me was its ability to remove itself from the listening experience ... judged on its own the S8 is one hell of a loudspeaker for stereo playback ... They do so much right ... wonderful sound."

The sole flaw of this amazing work occurs in the beginning of the track, as the treble peaks at a point where I assume Gerard's voice overwhelmed the microphone. I often use this snippet to evaluate tweeter performance, since some tweeters can sound downright nasty on it. The S8 sounded less hashy than I recall other speakers, to the point where it was difficult to notice. I usually give a good wince in that section, but this time around I had to replay it a second time to pick it up. This is where knowing the people involved in production would assist in finding the culprit. My other reference on *Into the Labyrinth*, "The Ubiquitous Mr. Lovegrove" puts soundstage and imaging front and center. The continuous barrage of sounds from didgeridoo to flute, to who knows what else, all occurring in very specific, different spots in the soundstage can really tax a speaker's resolve. The S8 absolutely sailed through this, creating a wall of sound as wide as it was deep, with every instrument clearly rendered and operating within its own specific space.

I had a chance to run through a high resolution favorite of mine, Beck's *Sea Change* in SACD. Engineered by Bob Ludwig, this experimental album boasts

layered composition, an expansive soundstage, and wide dynamic contrasts. The S8s ripped through tracks like "Paper Tiger", blending Beck's distinctive scratchy vocals with a string section that moves up and down the scale to dramatic effect. At silly levels "Tiger" is an absolute trip to experience, and the S8's ability to maintain composure at such volumes was a real treat. Because of their high sensitivity, I was easily able to drive them without my amp breaking a sweat, and boy do they ever play loud. When I cranked up the system a couple of times just to see how they would handle it, my ears gave up well before the speakers did. It is not just their ability to play loud that impresses, but how little the speaker's character changes at extreme levels. There are many speakers that can sound good at moderate volumes but not many stay the same at "11".

Excellent bass reproduction has always been a hallmark of Paradigm designs, and the S8 was no exception. With clean output into the low 30s the S8 stands well on its own when run full range. Some of the more bass happy moments on Bjork's second album *Post* come from the bass synthesizer notes throughout the background layer of "Hyper-Ballad". The S8 was up to the task with excellent extension and pitch on the overlapping, often problematic tones in this song. While it may not have had the ultimate impact of the Signature Servo or my big reference subwoofer, I felt no need for such enhancement on music playback via the S8.

Recordings from the "I love the music but hate the production value" camp came through in all their mediocre sounding glory, which is to be expected of a speaker of the S8's resolution. I know there is some debate as far as what a speaker should or should not add to the source. There is a very vocal camp that wants a warm glow on all of their records regardless of the source quality. While I can understand the need to have your entire collection to sound its best, I think the sacrifices made in those designs truly rob good recordings of all they can be.

Much like the Hippocratic Oath, speakers should first and foremost "Do no harm". With the Signatures I felt that was exactly what I was getting.

"The Signature Servo provided tremendous impact on those critical low notes that make the scene as effective as the sound designer intended. All the items in the room that typically rattle when I use my big reference subwoofer did so with the Signature Servo ... in this scenario the Paradigm actually packed more wallop ..."

Of all the attributes the S8, and the rest of the Signature line for that matter, possesses, the quality that consistently impressed me was its ability to remove itself from the listening experience. I have often heard the axiom that good acting, and for you sports fans out there, good referees, should be transparent, meaning that if the performance is effective, the viewer should not even be aware of their role. The S8 embodies this philosophy more than any speaker I have evaluated to date. In fact, judged on its own, the S8 is one hell of a loudspeaker for stereo playback. For you two-channel aficionados looking for a new reference, you may want to give the S8 a run in your system. They do so much so right that if you are even remotely interested in the music playing, you will simply forget the equipment delivering this wonderful sound.



Signature Servo

That is unless you are unaccustomed to such a hard to fault performer, in which case you will find yourself asking what is that and how do I get it in my own rig.

“... the Paradigms definitely provided that extra thrill ... Judged against my reference system — the Signature series came up as the overall winner to these ears ... Track after track, movie after movie, I had a tough time convincing myself I could continue to live without them after the Paradigms left ...”

THE ANCHOR

I have said it before, and I will say it again, the center channel makes or breaks a good 5.1 system. Let's face it, the sound we are most familiar with and, I suspect, the most discerning of, is the human voice. Are you intimately familiar with the sound a worm hole generates when it opens in galactic outer space? I know I am not. When our favorite action hero mercilessly bombards us with hackneyed anecdotes or witless puns, we demand said puns and anecdotes clearly reproduce the genuine article. The C5 proved capable, with excellent dialogue reproduction, frequency response and dynamic handling. Much like the S8, the C5 had a clear treble with an excellent tonal balance that only slightly hinted at harshness when pushed to SPLs that would drive most people out of the room. Besides, at that point, I would lay even money that whatever brightness did come across was already present and accounted for in the source material. While watching *The Bourne Identity*, the metallic clang of spent shells and the crystalline shattering of glass in one of the attempted assassination scenes were truly lovely to endure. Typically, such effects can become overbearing at times, but I had not the slightest inclining to ease back on the volume in such scenes. In fact, it handled them so deftly, I often found myself playing above the level I am accustomed to listening.

As good as the C5 is I was not completely overwhelmed by its timbral matching to its L/R comrades. I have been fortunate enough to be using, what I believe to be, the best possible implementation of a center channel. That is a speaker identical to and oriented exactly as its left/right counterpart. When you have three identical speakers all operating on the same plane, it presents a unified stage that is virtually indistinguishable on pans. However, it is expected that the C5, being a different shape and configuration than the S8, would also sound somewhat different. But, in spite of this, the C5 is one of the best center speakers I have heard to date and integrates very well with the S8. I just would have enjoyed playing with three S8s up front to hear the difference. Of course, you need a projection screen that is transparent to audio.

SURROUNDS

Prior to the arrival of the Paradigms, I had been running a 7.1 system with identical direct radiating side and rear speakers. At the time I set up this room, I felt I could get away with direct radiators for side/rear duty since I was using four speakers to saturate the space and had sufficient distance from the listening position to diffuse the sound field. My initial plan has held up well, and surround material is difficult to localize. Difficult but not impossible. Even with the generous dimensions of my theater room and proper time alignment I can, at times, pick out surround effects in too specific a manner. Sounds that should be more diffuse and set back in the soundstage can sometimes come across too defined in sound and location. Using the Signature ADPs in a more conventional 5.1 configuration showed once again how an engaging and cavernous space can be created with a single pair of dipoles set high up in the rear. Material that had felt too specific before had the appropriate diffusive quality via the ADPs that generates the illusion of an immense sound field. The ADP's generous 8" woofer deftly handled large scale explosions and effects. This allowed me to run the rears a little lower than typical if I wanted to achieve a more full-range surround field.

“... these speakers look like a million bucks ... exemplary ... superb ... a level of craftsmanship that exceeds all of Paradigm's previous efforts ... finely crafted ... Even the speaker grilles are a step up, with a weight that conveyed quality ...”

Like their cousins in the line, the ADPs were able to play loud without sounding strained and put up an immense soundstage. In the truly wretched Stephen King adaptation *Dreamcatcher*, the film's opening has multiple 360 degree pans that envelope the listener. The ADPs provided excellent rear fill and created that cohesive sonic bubble that good 5.1 systems are capable of achieving. Considering my room's generous dimensions, I was left impressed and fully satisfied with just a pair of surrounds, something I did not think previously possible. I now giggle at the thought of what an additional pair ADPs would do for my room.

THOSE LOW NOTES

There has been many a disc that flaunts the nether-region we all admire so much, but the star of the stage lately has been the 0.1 portion of the 5.1 Dolby Digital track on *Finding Nemo*. There are at least a half dozen scenes in this delightful film that feature outstanding bass with a few that are downright frightening. The Darla fish tank tapping scene (Chapter 25) is my new tool to scare the living hell out of first time visitors to the theater. On the right system, in the right room, there should be no bloat or overhang, just super clean, super deep bass that you can feel in your pants and hear as your home's framing protests the subsonic assault. The Signature Servo provided tremendous impact on those critical low notes that make the scene as effective as the sound designer intended it to be. All the items in the room that typically rattle

when I use my big reference subwoofer did so with the Signature Servo. Since my reference subwoofer has an adjustable servo, I usually have it set to maximum control over the woofer. In this scenario the Paradigm actually packed more wallop if not as tight control. When I loosened up on my reference servo though, the two subs were note for note, all to the delight of the owner. The fact that the Signature Servo costs approximately a grand less speaks well of Paradigm's latest flagship.

THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM

Okay, so we have covered the performance of this system on a virtuoso basis, but it is when they perform together that they achieve their highest performance. Just to serve as background, I have been VERY happy with my reference speaker system. In nearly every way, they have served me well and leave little room for improvement in my diseased "upgraditis" mind. Despite this satisfaction, the Paradigms definitely provided that extra thrill to push my better angels to the background and move Mr. Spendthrift to the fore.

Judged against my reference system, which plays in the same MSRP territory and is quite a competent speaker in its own right, the Signature series came up as the overall winner to these ears. Track after track, movie after movie, I had a tough time convincing myself I could continue to live with them after the Paradigm's left without a slight sigh. As always, the wheels start turning in the head as I weigh my options. As I ponder, I think back to my cousin who, upon listening to Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*, admitted he had goosebumps throughout the entire track. Well so did I, and that is what makes these systems worth having.

CONCLUSIONS

I am not going to try and convince you that spending this kind of money on a 5.1 speaker system represents a "value" per se. In this day and age, the law of diminishing returns rules the land and allows us to achieve very high performance for a lot less than it used to cost. With that in mind, Paradigm offers outstanding

performance in every conceivable parameter with their new Signature Series. As to sound, aesthetics, fit, finish, and whatever other parameters used to evaluate the Sigs, the result is a first rate affair.

"... outstanding performance in every conceivable parameter ... As to sound, aesthetics, fit, finish, and whatever other parameters used to evaluate the Sigs, the result is a first-rate affair."

If this is the price neighborhood you are looking into or even above, I suggest you take a look at what Paradigm Signature speakers have to offer. The Signature Series is an awfully tough package to turn away. If this particular neighborhood is a bit out of your reach, I humbly suggest a 5-channel Signature S2 system with the Signature Servo or an even more economical sub handling everything below 80 Hz. This more fiscally responsible system would save some major green, and still not give up much in the way of performance.